

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

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O 081329Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 8614
INFO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 3815

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, LE
SUBJ: THE SARKIS RESIGNATION: BACKGROUND

1. ACCORDING TO GHASSEN TUENI, PRESIDENT SARKIS DECIDED ON JULY 3 OR 4 THAT HE SHOULD RESIGN BECAUSE OF HIS INABILITY TO MODERATE THE SYRIAN ASSAULT ON EAST BEIRUT. HE WAS PERSUADED TO AWAIT THE RESULTS OF FUAD BOUTROS' TRIP TO DAMASCUS ON JULY 5 BEFORE MAKING A FINAL DECISION, HOWEVER. BOUTROS WAS CHARGED, AMONG OTHER THINGS, WITH TELLING THE SYRIANS THAT IF A WAY WAS NOT FOUND TO PREVENT THE SENSELESS KILLING OF LEBANESE CIVILIANS, SARKIS WOULD QUIT. ACCORDING TO TUENI, THE SYRIAN REACTION WAS "SO WHAT?" THIS, PLUS THE APPARENT FUTILITY OF EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE CRISIS, PLUS THE INTENSIVE BOMBARDMENT OF THE CITY THE NIGHT OF JULY 5 WAS APPARENTLY THE FINAL STRAW. SARKIS INFORMED THOSE AROUND HIM AT THE PALACE ON THE MORNING OF JULY 6 THAT HE HAD MADE UP HIS MIND AND WAS RESIGNING AT NOON.

2. A FEVERISH SCURRYING ENSUED AND PEOPLE BEGAN CALLING AS SOON AS THE WORD WAS OUT. DANY CHAMOUN CALLED ME AT HOME AT ABOUT NOON AND ASKED THAT I TRY TO TALK SARKIS OUT OF HIS
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DECISION. I IMMEDIATELY CALLED BOUTROS AT THE PALACE AND HE SAID SARKIS HAD MADE UP HIS MIND BUT PERHAPS IT WOULD HELP IF I TALKED TO HIM. I HURRIED OVER AND MET WITH SARKIS FOR BETTER PART OF AN HOUR. BOUTROS JOINED US AFTER A FEW MINUTES.

3. SARKIS SAID HE FOUND HIMSELF IN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION.

HE COULD NOT ACCEPT DISARMAMENT OF CHRISTIANS IN BEIRUT UNLESS PALESTINIANS WERE ALSO TO BE DISARMED, AND SYRIANS SHOWED NO DISPOSITION TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT THAT. SECURITY COULD NOT BE MAINTAINED WITHOUT THE SYRIANS, BUT HE COULD NOT STAND BY AND WATCH BEIRUT BE DESTROYED. HE REITERATED, AS HE HAS THE LAST TWO TIMES I HAVE SEEN HIM, THE SAD LITANY OF HIS HIGH HOPES WHEN HE ASSUMED OFFICE AND HOW THEY HAD BEEN DASHED BY SUCCESSIVE FAILURES TO IMPLEMENT THE CAIRO AND RIYADH AGREEMENTS FOR THE DISARMING OF THE FACTIONS IN LEBANON. NO ONE HAD BEEN ABLE TO HELP HIM, THERE WAS NO WAY OUT. HE FELT THAT PERHAPS IF HE RESIGNED IT MIGHT MAKE SOME AMELIORATION POSSIBLE. AS USUAL, HE WAS VERY CALM AND UNEMOTIONAL.

4. I SAID I UNDERSTOOD FULLY HIS FEELING OF FRUSTRATION, BUT IF HE QUIT NOW HE WOULD LEAVE A VACUUM WHICH THE SYRIANS WOULD ATTEMPT TO FILL WITH THEIR OWN MAN. WHOEVER THAT MIGHT BE WOULD BE UNACCEPTABLE TO THE MASS OF MARONITES AND THERE WAS GOING TO BE A BLOODY CIVIL WAR. SOONER OR LATER THE ISRAELIS WOULD FEEL CALLED UPON TO INTERVENE AND THE NEXT ARAB-ISRAEL WAR WOULD BE UPON US. THE SITUATION WOULD NOT BE BETTER WITH HIS RESIGNATION, IT WOULD BE WORSE. I URGED HIM TO RECONSIDER HIS DECISION AND ASKED IF THERE WAS ANYTHING WE COULD DO THAT MIGHT CONVINCE HIM TO REMAIN.

5. SARKIS SAID, NO, HIS MIND WAS MADE UP. BOUTROS AFFIRMED THAT THIS WAS THE CASE AND THAT THE PRESIDENT WAS NOT INDULGING
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IN ANY POLITICAL GAMBIT. I THEN TRIED DISCUSSING THE DEPARTMENT'S PRELIMINARY IDEAS ON HOW WE MIGHT SEPARATE THE COMBATANTS AND HAVE THE SYRIANS WITHDRAW TO MAJOR ROAD JUNCTIONS AND PERHAPS HAVE THE LEBANESE ARMY GO INTO EAST BEIRUT. SARKIS SAID THAT WOULD NOT WORK. THE SYRIANS WOULD NOT WITHDRAW IN THEIR PRESENT STATE OF MIND, AND WHATEVER ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE WE WOULD INEVITABLY COME DOWN TO THE BEDROCK PROBLEM OF DISARMING THE MILITIAS, WHICH WOULD HAVE TO BE DONE IN A BALANCED FASHION, WHICH WAS IMPOSSIBLE, ETC. IT WAS A VICIOUS CIRCLE. THE PRESIDENT CLEARLY WAS NOT INTERESTED IN DISCUSSING IDEAS. BOUTROS SAID THAT HE HIMSELF COULD NOT EVEN THINK ABOUT SUCH PROBLEMS, HE WAS SO WORKED UP ABOUT THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION. I ASKED SARKIS WHEN HE PLANNED TO DO THE DEED. HE SAID AS SOON AS HE COULD FIND THE SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT (KAMEL AL-ASSAD) AND SUBMIT HIS RESIGNATION TO HIM.

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EXDIS

6. I WENT HOME, CALLED THE EMBASSY IN TOWN AND REPORTED THE RESULTS, WHICH GEORGE LANE TELEPHONED TO MORRIS DRAPER IN NEA. LATER IN THE AFTERNOON DRAPER CALLED BACK WITH A MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY ASKING SARKIS WHAT SORT OF ARRANGEMENTS HE ENVISAGED FOR LEBANON WHEN HE LEFT IT RUDDERLESS. I TYPED OUT THE TEXT AND WENT BACK TO THE PALACE. SARKIS CAME OUT OF A MEETING WITH THE CABINET TO SEE ME. HE READ THE MESSAGE AND SAID, "PUT YOURSELF IN MY POSITION. IMAGINE WALKING OUT ON THAT BALCONY IN THE EVENING AND WATCHING BEIRUT BEING DESTROYED. IMAGINE BEING UNABLE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. I, WHO HAVE ALWAYS BEEN KNOWN AS A DECISION MAKER AND A MAN WHO GETS THINGS DONE, I CANNOT DO ANYTHING TO SAVE MY COUNTRY. I AM ASHAMED TO BE TAKING MY SALARY. I CAN DO NOTHING. THEREFORE, I AM LEAVING." I SAID AGAIN THAT I UNDERSTOOD, BUT WHAT ARRANGEMENTS HAD HE MADE FOR A TRANSITION OF POWER? WHO WOULD TAKE OVER?

7. SARKIS SAID THE PRECEDENT HAD BEEN SET BY BISHARA AL-KHOURY IN 1952. (I AM CONSTANTLY AMAZED AT LEBANESE ABILITY TO CREATE CONSTITUTIONAL PRECEDENTS.) HE HAD RESIGNED AND APPOINTED A MARONITE PRIME MINISTER AND TWO MINISTERS, A SUNNI AND A GREEK ORTHODOX, TO TAKE OVER. (THE PRIME MINISTER IS
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SUPPOSED TO ASK WITHIN THREE DAYS FOR A MEETING OF PARLIAMENT TO ELECT A NEW PRESIDENT. PARLIAMENT MIGHT VERY WELL NOT MEET FOR A MATTER OF MONTHS, HOWEVER.) HE HAD FOUR OR FIVE CANDIDATES IN MIND FOR PRIME MINISTER. THEY INCLUDED MICHEL KHOURY, ABDUL AZIZ SHEBAB AND JEAN AZIZ. HE HAD RUN INTO

OPPOSITION FROM THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE MUSLIMS, HOWEVER. THEY WERE OBJECTING THAT, GIVEN THE LONG LAPSE OF TIME SINCE THE LAST ELECTION, THE PARLIAMENT WAS NOW UNREPRESENTATIVE AND COULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO ELECT A PRESIDENT. HE THOUGHT THEIR OBJECTIONS COULD BE OVERCOME. I COULD ASSURE SECRETARY VANCE THAT HE WOULD USE HIS PRESIDENTIAL PREROGATIVES TO THE FULL IN ORDER TO ENSURE A PEACEFUL TRANSITION.

8. AFTER MY RETURN TO THE RESIDENCE, AND AS I WAS CONVEYING THE ABOVE REACTION TO LANE, GHASSEN TUENI CALLED TO SAY THE PRESIDENT HAD APPARENTLY DECIDED TO FREEZE HIS RESIGNATION UNTIL THE FOLLOWING DAY AT LEAST. TUENI COMMENTED THAT THE VARIOUS CALLS SARKIS WAS RECEIVING, AND THE SECRETARY'S MESSAGE IN PARTICULAR, WERE BEGINNING TO HAVE AN EFFECT. ONE MESSAGE IN PARTICULAR WHICH SEEMS TO HAVE HAD AN EFFECT WAS A CALL FROM HAFEZ AL-ASSAD. ACCORDING TO THE BRITISH AMBASSADOR, THIS CALL WAS STIMULATED BY SULEIMAN FRANGIEH, WHO APPARENTLY POINTED OUT TO THE SYRIANS THE STUPIDITY OF THEIR EARLIER POSITION.

9. AS OF 2130 ON THE 7TH I UNDERSTAND THE PRESIDENT WAS STILL VERY DEPRESSED ABOUT THE SITUATION AND IF, AS DANY CHAMOUN PREDICTS, THE SYRIANS ARE GOING TO CREATE A PRETEXT ON JULY 8 FOR A MASSIVE ATTACK, I FEAR HE MAY GO THROUGH WITH HIS ORIGINAL INTENTION. I WOULD THEN EXPECT THE LEBANESE ARMY TO JOIN FORCES WITH THE KATA'IB AND AHRAR IN ATTACKING SYRIAN FLANKS AND COMMUNICATIONS LINES AND WE WILL BE OFF TO THE RACES.

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